

Exploring Ghanaian Death Rituals and Funeral Practices

Summary: This July, I would like to travel to Accra to explore Ghanaian death rituals and funeral practices, specifically centered on communities that engage in the construction and consumption of abebuu adekai, or fantasy coffins.

When I was sixteen, my grandmother died in my bedroom. I'd given it up, of course, for her to die in—for her to live in until she died. She was seventy-two when she quit smoking, and seventy-three when she was diagnosed with emphysema. Quickly, she turned into wheezing wax, barely able to tongue the dried spit-cakes from the corners of her mouth. I'd mix her pink liquid morphine into oatmeal, and flex her bendy straw to complement the angle of her mechanical bed. The catheter bag scared me the most, warm on my bare calves when I'd brush against it, heavy and sagging with orange fluid from failing kidneys. Later: red. One night, I went to sleep and when I woke up her body was gone. I do not remember her funeral.

In Western cultures, death means separation from reality, consciousness, and the material world. There is an effort to avoid public discussion of death, and the death industry operates privately, away from highly visible commerce areas such as strip malls or glossy magazine pages. There is a blatant lack of advertising for death products (coffins, tombstones, plots of land, etc.), allowing thoughts of death and dying to recede into a contained and infrequently visited part of social life—leave the darkness of death to the bereaved and the table of Goth kids in the cafeteria. There is a legitimate terror inherent in the death of a loved one insofar as it reminds us that we are alive, and

therefore will die. And this terror is so intense and uncomfortable that we avoid confrontation with it at all costs.

When I first heard about fantasy coffins popularly used for burial in Ghana—coffins made to represent what the deceased person loved most in life (Coca Cola), a symbol of his or her occupation (a chicken, for a farmer), or even a vice (cigarettes or beer bottles)--my initial reaction was laughter, followed by a Google search. Surely, no one could take these bigger-than-my-body, painted and shellacked, toy-like objects seriously. Turns out, they are as serious as a heart attack.



Through my research, I discovered that the typical funeral in the Akan region of Ghana is often known to cost nearly as much as one Ghanaian's yearly income (Bonetti, 25). Money is collected, borrowed, and donated toward the execution of a perfect funeral—success being measured by extravagance and attendance. The two to eight hour performances require intense planning and spending for space, service conductors, seating arrangements, clothing, musicians, transportation, activities, coffins, and elaborate banquets (Bonsu, 44). The motivating source behind these lavish funerals is multidimensional, and the popularization of these traditions has contributed greatly to the commercialization and secularization of the funeral in Ghana as well as the resulting economic growth.

Firstly, there is an enormous social pressure surrounding burial. Second, there is the more familiar motivator of honoring the memory of a deceased person's life as well as embracing the "hereafter" towards which the deceased is headed. The social drive works to promote the surviving relatives, reinforcing the sincerity and meaningfulness of relationships through a material display of devotional "proof," as well as meeting the social expectations of public grieving (van der Geest, 107).

At the center of the ritual are the *abebuu adekai* (literally, "receptacles of proverbs"), or, as they are commonly referred to, fantasy coffins. Central to the posthumous construction of identity that takes place in Ghanaian tradition, the custom is less than a century old, and its origins are attributed to a carpenter named Seth Kane Kwei (Bonetti, 14). The fantasy coffin is a custom made sarcophagus built to resemble a significant element of a person's life. Symbolic representations of occupation (a uterus coffin for a gynecologist, or a shoe for a cobbler), "favorite" products (cell phones), cherished items (sewing machines), or unfulfilled dreams (an airplane coffin for a woman who'd always wanted to travel, but died first), these coffins harp on legacy and reputation. As story-telling symbols, fantasy coffins are concise and pointed narratives expressed in a type of visual "writing" that negotiates a new identity for the deceased (Bonetti, 16). For example, my *adekai* would most likely be an Apple product. My grandmother's: a 1992 red Chrysler Lebaron, or a Lorna Doone cookie.





There is an undeniable levity here. Regardless of the semi-celebratory nature of the service, the coffin—the vessel that carries one into the afterlife—becomes as much a part of the ceremony as the corpse. Within recent decades, fantasy

coffins have been commercialized internationally as well as within Ghana. While the value of fantasy coffins in Ghana is of a ritual and social nature, their popularity as contemporary African art objects is growing (Bonetti, 14). In the academic conversation surrounding the tradition, there is of course a tension between the coffins as symbols and the coffins as artworks, between carpenter/artisan and artist, sarcophagi and sculpture. As African art becomes increasingly commodified on an international scale, inevitable issues arise regarding the stripping of original meaning from objects as they pass into the art market. The kitschy attraction to the death object as an addition to a growing contemporary art collection is liberating, and inherently less dark than other impulses to collect death ritual artifacts. In other words, when the fantasy coffin becomes an object for collectors, there is less of a perceivable offense created by its new use and subsequent change in value. The idea of a fantasy coffin seems funny, strange, absurd, uncomfortable, even, but it doesn't quite ever reach the feelings of somberness that is typically connected to the sobriety of a funeral ceremony in the Western imagination. It is unnatural—exotic both in origin and concept—a death object that successfully suppresses the intensity of the very idea that it evokes.

While the instincts that influence funeral ceremonies in Ghana are as controversial as they are complex, my question is how does the commercialization and international publicity of the funeral and the sheer grandness of planning and execution affect one's ability to grieve? Does the commitment to the ritual encroach at all on the community's relationship to death and dying? Criticized by many—scholars, bloggers, citizens of Ghana, and the like—as a “waste” of money and resources, is it possible that one result of the sometimes months long investments in funeral planning serves as a hectic distraction from the immeasurable sadness that widows, orphans, and left-behind loves ones are resigned to experiencing within our culture (van der Geest, 119)? Perhaps even death itself is less scary when shrouded beneath a parade of lavish social protocol. Take away the funeral parlor organ belching Ave Maria belching and what remains? And, furthermore, how does it affect the identity of the living to know that a carefully planned funeral, rather than one's present reputation, can expunge an old identity and write a new one after death? The most interesting thing to this young artist and constant mourner is that the extravagance of Ghanaian funerals both alludes to death and dying while repressing it beneath rules and social customs that are, to put it simply, distracting. Does enormous material and symbolic gain postpone the sadness of incomprehensible loss? And if not, what is the drive away from death-inspired terror with which I have always felt my culture approaches death toward literal death ritual immersion found in Ghana?

I propose that I be chosen as a recipient of the Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship. If selected, I will travel to Accra and examine up close both the art of death as well as the growing consumer initiatives that surround new and thriving traditions. I will observe and attend as many funerals as possible, apprentice at several coffin

workshops and mortuaries with varying degrees of relationship to the Western Art World, as well as conduct interviews with death industry professionals, the bereaved, and the dying—seeking answers to the questions above. In recent weeks, I have reached out to several coffin carpenters in Accra and the surrounding rural regions to inquire about the opportunity to observe, document, and apprentice at their workshops. In addition to eager responses from two carpenters, I have also received secondary contact information for English speaking collectors who travel frequently within the area and could potentially be helpful in the logistical planning of my journey. Eric Adjetay Anang, a carpenter famous for having apprenticed under the now deceased Paa Joe (one of the foremost coffin carpenters in Ghana) has notified me that I “will be warmly welcome at the shop,” and has even offered me a place to stay at a guesthouse right next door. Informed by a wealth of qualitative data in the form of audio recordings, digital video, photographs, and transcriptions, I hope to produce a series of twenty prints inspired by the visual language of the *abebuu adekai*. By assessing and recycling the cultural funeral infatuation of Ghana, I additionally hope to construct a fantasy coffin that reflects the contemporary discussion of death, or lack thereof, in the United States.

I can’t begin to fathom a more inspirational undertaking for a young artist than to confront and investigate the truth that she is dying. Through my choice to experience Ghana via the death ceremony, I am able to guarantee an intellectual and personal curiosity that is as unending as the senselessness of death itself. My work thus far as an undergraduate has sought to expose the humor buried in trauma, to develop a playful vocabulary with which to address and discuss the most homely aspects of existence in a matter-of-fact and deliberately unsubtle way without the expected emotional

repercussions. While it seems I am constantly ebbing and flowing from a text-based foundation in my work, the search continues for an image-based method of narrating the past and writing the future—trying to pare down an image and make it as concise as its linguistic equivalent: Grandmother. Oatmeal. Oxygen. Catheter. Death. I, too, prefer a fantasy, and with the help of this fellowship, I can begin to build my own.

Works Cited

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